

His only mistake was in licking her neck, coming into direct contact with the 'perfume.' His tongue swelled up and went numb, and then began to burn as if on fire, and he — in his temporary superior position — drove his face past his wife's and attempted to remove the offending fluid via a licking of the pillow with a movement so panicked and vigorous that it drew the entire length of his body into a serpentine-like writhe, eliciting from the laid-back Ruth a moan of, "Oh Ellis!"

## HEADS AND TAILS BLUES

The best scientific evidence available said that sea level had stabilized, making the south shore of the new Loma Alta Lagoon appear better than ever to the honchos at Royalty Resorts, so those intrepid guys and gals drew straws to see who would get to go in and make a few offers, again, and Eugene Pengelly got the short one ....

The shakes rippled in when he saw the blue water through a corroded and warped cyclone fence that spanned two adjacent houses. Those jitters were so bad by the time he'd parked in front of the Leahy house that he resorted to a self hug, his head resting atop the steering wheel, his eyes shut tight as he drew deep breaths to calm himself. This is where it had happened, his double mutilation, Wound One: an ear nipped off by the Leahy's pet pig gone vicious; Wound Two: a soup-bowl-sized hunk of meat scooped out of his buttock by a big blue shark when, in an effort to avoid a beating following the pig attack, he sought sanctuary in the lagoon. A little game of porcine/Carcharinus glaucus heads and tails, a horrific experience that didn't end, from a physical standpoint, until the last of the plastic surgeries was completed nine months later.

The psychological scars remained.

A rapping on the passenger window jerked Eugene back into his leather upholstery: Ellis Leahy — a broad-brimmed straw hat pushed back on his head, a weed wacker in his hand — stood bent at the waist on the curb strip grass, grinning into the car. "Well, well, well. If it ain't old Gene Pengelly of Royalty Resorts fame. What's up, Eugene? You got us another offer?" "No, no!" Eugene blurted through the hot glass. "Relax, big guy. Ruth's not here and the pig's tied up in the back yard. Why don't you come on in for a beer, run your offer by me?" Eugene forced a trembling smile onto his face and shook his head and replied, "Maybe some other time, Mr. Leahy." "Call me Ellis," said Ellis, as Sandra, his wife's supposedly tied up pig, placed her front hooves on top of the creaking redwood fence that ran between the Johnson and Leahy homes, popping her



head up over the top board. Eugene Pengelly caught sight of her, screamed, and hit the gas, making his car fishtail as his tires squealed and kicked up a half a hundred of the fallen hard berries of the Leahy's curb strip Brazilian pepper tree, an organic shotgun blast that made Mr. Ellis Leahy jerk and twitch for the duration of its short-lived fury.

## VIVA LAS VEGAS

When Carmen got tired of the rut she'd worked herself into — dancing at Loma Alta's lone topless bar — she broke out and headed east in her cherry-red Camaro. She wound out Highway 76 under a canopy of sycamore and eucalyptus trees, hit Interstate 15 and blasted up over the crest of the Cajon Pass in less than an hour and bombed into the immense Mojave where she blew through Barstow like it was standing still, next stop Las Vegas.

She checked into The Mint and cleaned up and put on a black slinky dress and rode the elevator down to the casino where she parked herself at the roulette table with a stack of quarter chips, playing three- and four-number combinations until a cuff-linked arm stretched by her neck and placed a hundred-dollar chip on number 26. "For the lady," said the arm's voice. "We'll play her age, for luck." The ball settled into the number 32 slot (Carmen's real age) and Carmen cursed Lady Luck before she turned to let the arm light her cigarette. At the end of the arm was a razor-cut, blow-dried man of craggy-but-handsome features, wearing a very expensive suit. "Perhaps," he said, slipping his gold lighter back into his pocket, "We should have played a lower number." Carmen blew smoke into his face and said, "You shoulda played the fucking number that came up, buck-o."

A smile deepened the man's facial grooves. He offered Carmen his hand and said, "I'm Silvio." Carmen took the hand, noted the baby-soft skin, and said, "I'm Tawny," and with the hint of a mean little smile she added, "And I think all men are swine." Silvio brought her hand to his lips and kissed it and said, with his eyes shining, "Let me prove you wrong."

He didn't, but Carmen didn't care. He financed a night of high-stakes gambling that netted her several thousand dollars, and at the end of the night, at the door to her room when it became apparent that she was planning to leave him out in the cold, and after some clumsy strong-arm tactics on his part that Carmen handled like a pro, he offered her five thousand dollars for one night of sin. She took the money and let him feel her breasts as they sat side-by-side on her bed, and then she brought him off with her hand.